



The Cleveland Museum of Art

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Contact: Greg Donley

A Map of the East: Leo Rubinfien Photographs
September 16 - November 27, 1994

From September 16 to November 27, The Cleveland Museum of Art presents **A Map of the East: Leo Rubinfien Photographs**, next in the series of photography exhibitions in gallery 105. An American who had lived in Japan during late youth, Rubinfien went back to Asia to photograph between 1979 and 1988, with the help of grants from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the Asian Cultural Foundation. His 1992 book, *A Map of the East*, published 121 of the photographs that emerged from his efforts; this exhibition presents twenty of them.

In a time when ancient Asian cultures are rapidly adapting to a global economy, Rubinfien's photographs are at once the artist's subjective interpretations of what he sees and an outsider's objective documentation of cultural changes. His title for the project, *A Map of the East*, is deliberately ironic: these highly personal impressions are anything but a comprehensive record of what lies where, and the cultures he photographs are changing too quickly to be plotted accurately. Even the term "the East" implies a subjective, Western perspective. His colorful, intimate images of life in Japan, China, Thailand, Indonesia, Burma, India, Viet Nam, and the Philippines provide glimpses of individual human lives embracing, resisting, ignoring, being swept up by broad social events. Managing to infiltrate his Western camera into the unspectacular rhythms of day-to-day life, Rubinfien puts the viewer in the midst of his subjects' lives, but in the quiet role of an interested observer. He does not assume that the viewer knows anything about Asia, and his photographs provide few landmarks to help even the informed viewer locate the scene. The interaction between subject and viewer is to be experienced directly, without any previous knowledge.

Rubinfien's compositions amplify the viewer/subject tension. Sometimes the camera moves in close, evoking grins or wary stares. Often foreground portions of figures invade the frame, implying that the subjects are not the only people present. Even his unpeopled images pose the question: who else, besides the photographer, was there? By placing the viewer so viscerally as an outsider observing unfamiliar lives, Rubinfien mirrors the experience of his Asian subjects, who increasingly find their own lives confronting the tension between familiar and unfamiliar. The exhibition was organized by Tom Hinson, curator of contemporary art.